

# **Make Your Mind Strong: My Father's Insights into Academic Success**

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## **Abstract**

Through a series of interviews, I learned how my father drew upon his family's and community's teachings, which were deeply rooted in traditional Haida pedagogy, to achieve success. I reflected on his stories and their connections and the work of other Indigenous scholars in the field of education to thematically organize the teachings that he shared. I came to understand seven important principles of traditional Haida pedagogy: learning is authentic; learning involves making a contribution; learning occurs through observation; learning involves curiosity; learning involves aspects of spirituality and protocol; learning involves the importance of visualization; and learning involves the connection between mind and heart.

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\* This article was based on a series of interviews with Robert Davidson. Though he did not write the article, he reviewed its contents prior to submitting it, and I made the adjustments and clarifications he requested. Robert Davidson has been listed as an additional author to demonstrate respect and appreciation for his significant contributions.

*Keywords:* Indigenous pedagogy, Haida pedagogy, learning principles, education, Indigenous education, intergenerational learning

## Résumé

À travers une série d'entrevues, j'ai appris comment mon père a créé sa réussite en puisant dans les enseignements de sa famille et de sa communauté, qui étaient profondément enracinés dans la pédagogie haïda traditionnelle. J'ai réfléchi à tout ce qu'il m'a raconté et me suis penché sur les travaux d'autres chercheurs autochtones dans le domaine de l'éducation afin d'organiser par thèmes les enseignements qu'il m'a transmis. C'est ainsi que j'ai dégagé sept principes clés de pédagogie haïda traditionnelle : l'apprentissage est authentique; l'apprentissage implique qu'on apporte sa propre contribution; l'apprentissage passe par l'observation; l'apprentissage suppose la curiosité; l'apprentissage comprend des facettes spirituelles et un protocole; l'apprentissage ne va pas sans la visualisation; l'apprentissage implique une communion entre l'esprit et le cœur.

*Mots-clés :* pédagogie autochtone, pédagogie haïda, principes de l'apprentissage, éducation, éducation autochtone, apprentissage intergénérationnel

## Introduction

I do not remember when I first learned that my father did not complete high school in his home community. I suspect it was in preparation for a visit with the family who hosted him in the far away city of Vancouver for his final year of high school. My father was still a teenager when he made the journey from Masset, on the northern tip of Haida Gwaii, to a high school with a larger population than his entire home community, and I have never been able to imagine the adversities that he had to overcome in order to graduate.

As an educator who has worked with Indigenous students who struggle academically, I have often wondered about what transpired for my father to accomplish what seemed to me a near-impossible feat: graduating from high school after the school in his home community decided to discontinue Grades 11 and 12 due to dwindling numbers. Like many Indigenous educators, I am concerned about the inability of our current education system to meet the needs of Indigenous students (Sterling, 1992), and I imagined it might be possible to learn from his success. I believed that I could interview my father and use the findings to support Indigenous students so that they may experience academic success as he did. It was with this in mind that I first considered approaching him to discuss the possibility of working on this project.

As a doctoral student of mixed Haida ancestry, I have often struggled to journey between two educational worlds: the Indigenous world of my father's ancestors and the predominantly Eurocentric world of today. It is perhaps worth noting that it was not until I became a graduate student that I formally learned about Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies, and pedagogies. Until then, I had learned them only by living them. Though these Indigenous ways of understanding already existed within me, graduate school taught me the words and the definitions I could use and the names of the scholars I could cite to give credence to my own ideas and to those that were transmitted to me throughout my life.

When I finally made the decision to ask my father about his experiences, I recognized that I was embracing an Indigenous pedagogical practice—one of seeking guidance from Elders and knowledge keepers instead of books and courses. Despite the fact that the university had been unable to provide the answers for which I was looking, I quickly realized it was the courses I took in my program that gave me the confidence to believe I could now ask the right questions. My courses also taught me to trust my ability to

translate<sup>1</sup> my father's ideas into a language that would be accessible to other educators and scholars in the hopes of helping Indigenous students to achieve academic success. Though now, upon reflection, I realize that I actually hoped to gain answers from my father that my university education could not provide.

My father does not identify himself as an Elder; however, he lived among Elders when he was a child. He was brought up in many of the old ways and now often acts as a liaison for his community between those old ways and the ways of today. He takes this role seriously and spends significant amounts of time reading and rereading old and new texts about Haida history and protocol; he also recalls the teachings from his youth. He shares this knowledge when he is invited to do so, but he continues to struggle with being labelled an Elder despite the fact that he recognizes the people he used to ask for guidance are now gone.

“Traditionally, storytelling played an essential role in nurturing and educating First Nations children” (Thomas, 2005, p. 237), so it is therefore no surprise that I have grown up with my father’s stories. There are the stories he tells when we are in a particular place, the stories he tells when we are visiting someone, the stories he tells about his paintings and totem poles, and the stories he tells about his life. I have always listened in an attempt to understand him better. However, when I interviewed him for this project, I knew that I had to listen differently, for I had come to understand the wisdom in Marule’s (2012) words, “Our stories also impart lessons which reflect the cultural and spiritual practices that still inform our way of life today” (p. 136). Furthermore, I agree with Smith (2012) who writes:

Each individual story is powerful. But the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every indigenous person has a place. For many indigenous writers stories are ways of passing down the beliefs and values of a culture in the hope that the new generations will treasure them and pass the story down further. The story and the story teller both serve to connect the past with the future, one

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<sup>1</sup> I have included references in connection with some of my father’s ideas. This is not because these ideas are invalid without these references; rather, I consider this part of the academic translation process.

generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story.  
(pp. 145–146)

As Baker and Baker (2010) suggest, “Many of us have been severed from our roots and forgotten the deep sense of relation with our ancestors, the planet, and the cosmos, that have characterized human experience for millennia” (p. 98), but I would like to believe that our connection to our roots is merely dormant and, if given the opportunity, we can revive it once again.

## **Methodology**

Over a period of two weeks, I interviewed my father four times at his studio. We sat in a back room that was shaded by large maples and offered occasional glimpses of the river. Though I did not completely recognize it at the time, my father engaged in a more traditional approach to the interview process. This method involved sharing stories in response to interview questions and aligns with a more tribal epistemology (Kovach, 2009).

I recorded each interview, transcribed it, and returned the transcript to my father for his review before doing the next interview. I began the final three interviews by asking questions and clarifying my understandings from the previous interview. When I felt that I understood what my father was sharing with me, I wrote up my interpretations of his stories. I then shared my writing with him, and he clarified his ideas and suggested changes when he felt I had misunderstood his intent. This process was similar to the one described by Thomas (2005) in her work using a storytelling methodology.

Throughout this project, I was guided by the principles of Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008): respect, responsibility, reverence, and reciprocity. Later, as I worked through my understandings of my father’s stories, I was guided by the remaining Indigenous storywork principles of holism, interrelatedness, and synergy.

## **Respect**

In her description of the Indigenous storywork methodology, Archibald (2008) explains that she began with “the principles of respect for cultural knowledge embedded in the

stories and respect for the people who owned or shared stories as an ethical guide” (p. 36). I ensured that I treated my father and his stories with respect throughout this project. This meant that I considered the way in which I approached him to ask his permission, the way in which I asked questions and listened during our conversations, and the ways in which I shared his stories in my writing and presentations.

## **Responsibility**

In working with people’s stories, we must always exercise a degree of responsibility to ensure that we honour the storyteller’s intent. Archibald (2008) also reminds us that this means taking responsibility for our mistakes as “those who shared their knowledge with [us] did so with great care” (p. 24).

I recognized that I had a responsibility to my father to ensure that my writing reflected his intentions in telling me the stories. Because I reviewed my understandings with my father, he was able to have the final word on the communication of his ideas and my interpretations. In demonstrating responsibility for my father’s stories, I also had to recognize that some were shared with me as a daughter and not a researcher; these were held in my memory rather than placed on the page.

## **Reverence**

In her work with the Elders, Archibald (2008) observes that reverence is demonstrated through ceremonial practices as well as the ethical way in which the work is approached. Though this project did not include ceremonial activities, I engaged with the work using a degree of respect similar to what I would use in a ceremonial setting. That is, I conducted myself in a highly ethical manner, which aligned with principles I had been taught by my family. This ensured that I treated both my father and his stories with reverence.

## **Reciprocity**

Another aspect of the Indigenous storywork principles is to find ways to give back to the people with whom we are working (Archibald, 2008). Though I did not financially compensate my father, I believe that because I am his daughter he appreciated the time I spent listening, transcribing, and working to understand the meaning in his stories. He also

talked about the importance of being a *tsinnii* or grandfather, and part of this role is sharing knowledge with future generations. The writing that I did about his stories has already assisted in making many of my father's ideas more accessible to people. The sharing of these ideas with others aligns with both Archibald's (2008) and Kovach's (2009) ideas about ways to engage in reciprocity.

## Holism

Holism refers to "the interrelatedness between the intellectual, spiritual (metaphysical values and beliefs and the Creator), emotional, and physical (body and behaviour/action) realms to form a whole healthy person" (Archibald, 2008, p. 11). In this project, the idea of holism was taken up by ensuring that I was working with the stories in their entirety. I listened to the audio recordings of the conversations with my father from beginning to end and learned from the whole stories. I listened for patterns (Kovach, 2009) and the understandings that my father was sharing with me through repetition of the themes and ideas in his stories.

## Interrelatedness

Interrelatedness is "an interrelationship between the story, storytelling, and listener" (Archibald, 2008, p. 32). What was particularly remarkable about this relationship in the context of this project was the connection between a father and a daughter, which enhanced this interrelationship. For another researcher, the stories might only have existed in a singular dimension; however, for me, the stories also revealed significant aspects of my own history. In listening to the stories I learned about my father, but I also learned about myself.

## Synergy

The final Indigenous storywork principle is synergy (Archibald, 2008). In the context of Archibald's (2008) work, this is the power that is created during a storytelling session and moves among the storyteller and the listeners. She further explains, "This interaction created a synergistic story power that had emotional, healing, and spiritual aspects. The synergistic story power also brought the story 'to life'" (p. 100). My experience with

synergy in this project has come from sharing my understandings of my father's stories with others. His stories come alive in the excitement of other people when they envision how to incorporate his teachings into their own pedagogical practice.

## The Story of the Halibut

My father's stories of his childhood revealed many of the themes that I had previously encountered when learning about Indigenous pedagogical practices. In his stories, he discussed the importance of place (e.g., Marker, 2011) and the importance of authentic tasks (e.g., Nichol & Robinson, 2000), but he also spoke of his desire to be the *tsinnii* for his grandchildren that his *tsinnii* was for him. He told me a story about fishing for halibut with his grandfather, and I realized that this single story held much of my father's understandings about traditional Haida pedagogical practices.

We would row out maybe about an hour, out into the ocean with the tide...jigging for halibut, we'd sit there jigging for halibut for hours. And the halibut hook, we would bait it with *nuu*, octopus, and it would have a weight. The hook would be on the string there and the sinker...one long line. And the halibut and the bait would be strung off the sinker and we'd throw the line out and when we could feel it [the sinker] touching bottom, that was our guide. And I would just imitate *Tsinii*, jigging for halibut and sometimes there were long periods of no bites and *Tsinii* would tease me. He'd pretend to have a halibut and I'd get all excited and get the gaff all ready, the club, and then he'd laugh real hard. And also the other part of it was watching him. Like he would talk to the halibut. *Da'aal jad qaagee*. "Bite the bait. Don't just look at it." I asked Uncle Alfred. I said, "What was *Tsinii* saying to the halibut?" And he said, "Bite the bait. Don't just look at it." And when he caught the halibut, he would be talking to it again and he said, "Make your mind strong because I'm going to club you." And so he'd pull the halibut on board and he would re-bait the hook and he'd rub the new bait on the eyes of the halibut and he said, "Remember this. Don't just look at the bait. Bite it." And then he'd throw it out, throw the hook out again, and jig some more. So what that was teaching me was, the animal kingdom are humans. They didn't treat it lightly. They treated it like humans. (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 9, 2014)

The idea of making one's mind strong surfaced several times throughout my conversations with my father. He understands this Haida proverb to mean that we must mentally prepare for the adversity we face, but he also understands it as our capacity to visualize our outcomes and to manifest our desires, referring to the stories of Raven as evidence of this. When speaking further about making our minds strong, my father revealed to me that the Haida believe that our mind is located in our chest "because we feel everything there" (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 11, 2014), and I am reminded of Archibald (2008) who says that stories have the power to "educate the heart" (p. 83).

### **"Make your mind strong because I'm going to club you"**

Though my father told me many stories, the story of the halibut stood out in my mind. It is perhaps because the story captured many of the recurring themes from all of the stories that he shared. Upon further reflection, I realized that the story of the halibut illustrates five important principles that emerged from what could be considered traditional Haida pedagogical practices: learning is authentic, learning involves making a contribution, learning occurs through observation, learning involves curiosity, and learning involves aspects of spirituality and protocol.

#### **Learning Is Authentic**

The story of the halibut demonstrates that learning traditionally occurred while engaging in an authentic activity. In the story, my father was learning to catch halibut with a real hook and bait on a boat. This kind of authentic pedagogical experience reinforces the relevance of the task being taught. Learning in this way also afforded my father the opportunity to "learn independently by observing, listening, and participating with a minimum of intervention or instruction" (Battiste, 2002, p. 15). In the story of the halibut, it is significant to me that learning occurred while my father and his *tsinnii* were living their lives; this was not a separate fishing trip for the purpose of teaching my father to fish for halibut. As Brayboy and Maughan (2009) indicate, "Indigenous peoples come to know things by living their lives and adding to a set of cumulative experiences that serve as guideposts for both individuals and communities over time" (p. 3).

Another aspect of learning in an authentic way is illustrated by the fact that learning occurs in the environment for which it is relevant. In the story of the halibut, my father was learning on a boat on the water while fishing for halibut. Authentic learning also resonates with the work of Battiste (2002) who states, “Indigenous knowledge is also inherently tied to land, not to land in general but to particular landscapes, landforms, and biomes where ceremonies are properly held, stories properly recited, medicines properly gathered, and transfers of knowledge properly authenticated” (p. 13). This connection to the environment and the importance of the natural world was also a recurring theme in my father’s stories.

### **Learning Involves Making a Contribution**

The importance of making a contribution was also emphasized in many of my father’s stories, and according to him many of the people in his life communicated the importance of making a contribution. His grandmother, his grandfather, and his father all spoke to him about the necessity of giving back to his family and community.

We always had to contribute. Always, always, always... Chop wood, pack wood in, and when we got to the oil stove my chore was to fill the oil can that fed the stove... And also Dad would beach comb, so we went up the inlet and we’d beach comb the beach looking for logs because he was selling firewood. And those logs were big. I remember having to roll them up the beach and having to chop it. And my job was to pile the wood, and when I wasn’t doing a good job, he’d push it over and say, “You have to redo it.” And...because the firewood was on display. Other people were selling wood too and people would buy the best pile first. And I remember him telling me, he said Captain Brown told him, he said, “You have to give them a full cord when they’re buying a cord.” He said, “If I owed you a dollar, I’m not gonna give you 99 cents.” That’s what Dad told me. So that was another part of my learning is that you have to give 100%. When [you] make a commitment, you have to be fully committed. (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 11, 2014)

What is emphasized in this story that is not illustrated in the story of the halibut is the importance of quality. It was not enough to simply make a contribution; both the level

of effort and the product that was being produced had to demonstrate a commitment to excellence. This theme of the importance of contribution can be understood as an example of the concept of tribal nation building, which is “nestled in and based on epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions that the health and well-being of the nation and its communities is more important than any individual achievement” (Brayboy, Castagno, & Solyom, 2014, p. 578). Indeed, I believe that it was my father’s commitment to contributing to his extended family that guided much of his education outside of school.

## Learning Occurs Through Observation

In their attempts to understand traditional Indigenous pedagogical practices, Nichol and Robinson (2000) also discovered that “the more informal methods employed for learning included observation, imitation and casual instruction” (p. 497). According to my father, he learned from watching his father, grandfather, and his uncles. Learning through observation is not a widely used pedagogical practice in schools, and my father expressed that this was one of the challenges in his own schooling experience. He believed that there was a gap between him and the non-Aboriginal students because of these different ways of learning.

That was the other thing I remember, when the students were asked a question, it was always the white kids who had their hands up. Me, me, choose me, choose me. They were all so eager with the answer. We always stood back, but I never understood why. But it wasn’t our way. It wasn’t our way. So we were labelled as slow learners even though we knew the answer, we didn’t race to be chosen. (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 11, 2014)

As my father described, the differences in ways of learning also led to misconceptions about his academic ability.

## Learning Involves Curiosity

My father spoke of his curiosity many times throughout the interviews. He attributed much of his success to this trait. In the story of the halibut, my father demonstrated his curiosity when he wondered about what his *tsinii* was saying in Haida to the halibut. He

went to his uncle to ask him what the Haida expression meant, and his uncle explained it to him.

My father learned not to ask too many questions from his grandfather, as is evident in this description of learning to carve.

Sometimes when I was learning to carve from *Tsinii*, sometimes he got annoyed with me. He'd say, "Gaaa," and I knew I'd asked too many questions. So, I became sensitive in asking him why or what. And I found it easier to talk with Uncle Victor or Uncle Alfred. (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 11, 2014)

Before I interviewed my father, I had read about many Indigenous pedagogical practices, but I had only heard about the value of curiosity on one other occasion. During a presentation at the University of British Columbia, hereditary chief, artist, and knowledge keeper Beau Dick also briefly touched on the benefits of curiosity (personal communication, May 28, 2014). In my father's case, he believed it was this curiosity that drove him to learn more. In our conversations he described hearing praise for the art of another artist, and his curiosity about what made that art great led him to study it carefully and attempt to replicate the characteristics that made it superior. Even though he expressed that his curiosity taught him a lot about the world around him, my father also recognized that there were negative consequences when his curiosity irritated his grandfather, as mentioned previously, and his peers.

I was always curious. For example one of my cousins [name removed], he said, "How come you're always taking things apart?" He'd be really pissed off at me because I was always taking things apart. He said, "Why do you always take it apart?" But I had no idea that I was learning about the process at that age. (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 9, 2014)

Learning by observation lends itself to questioning, so an important aspect of having learning guided by curiosity is finding the balance between asking a sufficient number of questions to understand or confirm understanding without frustrating the person who is providing the instruction.

## Learning Involves Aspects of Spirituality and Protocol

In the story of the halibut, my father suggested that talking to the halibut was evidence that his grandfather did not view the halibut as an animal—that, in fact, he was demonstrating the same respect he would bestow upon another human being. This understanding is reflected in the use of the word *qaa* or uncle that is part of the expression *da'aal jad qaagee* (R. Davidson, personal communication, January 7, 2016). This understanding also supports Marker's (2011) observation that "Indigenous systems of knowledge and understandings of the past are different from these approaches in that they place animals as unsegmented from human beings" (p. 102). Furthermore, it is an example of embedding a spiritual component into every aspect of life (Nichol & Robinson, 2000) as well as incorporating protocol into educational experiences. Though it was not discussed, I believe that speaking to the halibut and rubbing the bait on its eyes was part of the Haida protocol for fishing, a practice that reflects the value that Haida people place upon animals.

It has been argued that this spiritual aspect of learning is absent from much of the mainstream schooling (Doige, 2003). Though I don't believe that ceremonial practices should be taught at the school (Marule, 2012), I agree that they are a part of the traditional transmission of knowledge. This means that they need to be considered in the presentation of concepts as well as respected as an important aspect of the knowledge that students bring from their home. In my father's stories, these spiritual practices did not exist separately from the transmission of knowledge. Instead, they made up a vital component of his education.

## ***Nangkilslas* or "He whose voice is obeyed"**

As I attempted to understand more about how my father successfully completed school, he told me about how the Haida believed in the extraordinary power of the mind. He spoke of how he learned to visualize and then manifest the outcome in school, basketball, and his life, and then he connected this idea to the stories of Raven, who is known as *Nangkilslas* or "He whose voice is obeyed." He made this connection because his understanding of Raven is that he too was capable of manifesting outcomes with the power of his mind.

## The Power of the Mind

I was surprised when my father began to speak of the power of visualization to achieve his goals and the important role that it played in his completion of high school. I know that this is a significant part of his life today, but I had always attributed its use to New Age books about the power of the mind to manifest your dreams. It never occurred to me that my father relied upon this strategy long before it was trendy to do so.

My father told me that he came upon it by accident. When he was about 13, he really wanted a bicycle, and this experience led him to his first encounter with the power of visualization.

One day I was looking through the catalogue, and I saw the bike I wanted so I had a visual on it. That's the bike I wanted and within three weeks I had enough money saved to buy it. So once I had the visual then I was able to accomplish it. So there were many other situations like that. Like the totem pole for example, I visualized the completion. I never ever thought of the process. Same with the Urban Feast and all the other feasts I've had, I visualize the feast. I visualized the Urban Feast. Everybody was having a great time. And then I find out later, I keep hearing the words "*Guudang anhl tladskadee.*" Make your mind strong. (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 11, 2014)

He explained to me that no one taught him how to do it; he just did it. However, it wasn't until he was an adult that he was able to look back upon this experience and realize what he had been doing. As he later understood, he had been tapping into what he calls a universal understanding (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 26, 2014). Though the example of the bicycle was the first time he remembers it happening, it also happened with basketball.

I remember when I learned basketball, I liked to play basketball, the coach, he saw something in me. He saw the places where I liked to play on the court and that was on the baseline and so he taught me how to shoot from there and I was willing to take direction and when I learned how to shoot there, I was actually scoring points for our team. And the other part of that was visualizing. I didn't realize that we are all born with that power of visualizing. Like I would visualize shooting the basket and making it and sometimes I would just throw the ball up

and it would go into the basket. (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 9, 2014)

He further explained that now he understands that his ideas for his art are premonitions (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 26, 2014). As an adult, he came to study more about the Haida myths, and he connected his power to visualize and manifest to Raven, and thus to Raven's ability to think things into reality.

### **The Importance of History and Stories**

During the interviews, my father drew upon examples from traditional stories and personal experiences to support the idea of the importance the Haida place on strength of the mind. According to my father, "Raven understood the mind was very powerful and so the Haida also understand the mind as being very powerful" (R. Davidson, interview, July 11, 2014). He went on to explain that "the way the story is told, Raven would think it to happen. He wanted to go to Point B and he would get there in one stroke of the paddle" (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 11, 2014). This example is described by Swanton (1905):

One time he [Raven] was going along with his cousin, he came to an island of L!k!ia'o. At once he went out and ate them. After he got through eating, he went back to shore with his cousin. And when they became thirsty he said to his cousin: "Take one stroke in the water, cousin." As soon as he did so they came to Standing-water creek, which is very far away. (p. 138)

There are numerous examples of Raven wishing for events to happen followed immediately by their occurrence.

It may seem difficult to imagine these stories reflecting the beliefs of Haida people; however, in my experience there is no boundary that exists between the human and the spirit world for many Haida people. Furthermore, cultural teachings are embedded in the stories of Raven and important lessons are transmitted to future generations with each telling. As Battiste (2002) observes, this is not an unusual perspective for Indigenous people. According to her, "Stories about animals are sometimes not about animals at all, but about proper human behaviour, and the most uproarious tales about the foibles and misdeeds of animals often contain wise insights about community ecology" (p. 19).

Another variation on the power of visualization is my father's recollection of the origin of Haida art, which was told to him by his father.

Dad told me another story on how the art started. He said there was this person, he saw in the water totem poles and the houses and the voice told him to memorize the totem poles. That's another visual. And so when he went back to the village he imitated what he remembered and that was the beginning of the totem poles. (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 11, 2014)

Though this example moves away from the more traditional stories which incorporate the teachings of Raven or supernatural beings, they are connected by their capacity to illustrate the Haida understanding of the power of the mind, which, when combined with the power of visualization, has the capacity to manifest desired outcomes.

## **The Mind in Your Chest**

During a discussion about making your mind strong, my father explained to me that the Haida believe that our mind resides in our chest. This surprised me and yet it made sense, as it emphasizes the connection between the mind and the more Western concept of the heart. As Brayboy, Castagno, and Solyom (2014) describe, "An individual's 'heart' offers the potential and possibilities of that individual's contribution to society and provides a valuable and compelling understanding of merit" (p. 588). Though we did not discuss it, I believe that this notion of the heart is integral to much of the education that my father received.

## **The Importance of Relationships**

The people my father recognizes as his teachers were the ones with whom he connected and for whom he held deep respect. He had developed significant relationships with each of these individuals and these relationships allowed for his strengths to be identified and built upon which led to his eventual success. This occurred in both his home life and school life. When I asked him why he liked particular teachers, he described what he appreciated about his math teacher: "It was more how they...the genuine connection they made with us because we could feel it. He had a passion for the math and also his

students. It didn't matter what colour they were" (R. Davidson, personal communication, July 11, 2014). The importance of building relationships and valuing students' contributions in education has also been noted in earlier research (e.g., Bazylak, 2002; Goulet, 2001).

### **The Importance of Recognizing and Encouraging Strengths**

My father's stories demonstrated the power of these relationships in his own life where he received encouragement from his family as well as his teachers and basketball coach at school. His ability to carve is an example of building on strengths. I was very intrigued to learn that he did not choose to begin carving and that it was actually his father who recognized this strength in him and encouraged him to begin. The fact that my father remains a Haida artist today is a testament to the accurate recognition of his ability in this area as well as the capacity of the people around him to recognize his talent and encourage him to pursue Haida art.

Okakok (2008) observed a similar practice in the northern communities of the Inupiat Inuit: "Once an Inupiat Eskimo child shows an inclination, such as an interest in archery, storytelling, or sewing, that interest is nurtured by all concerned with his 'education'" (p. 279). By knowing our students we can begin to recognize the individual strengths that they bring into the classroom rather than making generalizations based upon assumptions. As Battiste (2002) states,

Teachers need to recognize that they must use a variety of styles of participation and information exchanges, adapt their teaching methods to the Indigenous styles of learning that exist, and avoid over-generalizing Aboriginal students' capabilities based on generalized perceived cultural differences. (p. 15)

### **Does Education Make a Difference?**

This project began because I believed that my father's family and the traditional Haida pedagogical practices in which he engaged as a child prepared him for academic success at school. When I asked him whether mainstream education makes a difference, he told me that it does and that he believes it will help us adapt to the new economy and the ways

of the future. However, when I asked him if he felt that what he learned outside of school from his family and the community where he grew up contributed to his completion of high school, he said no.

My father doesn't see the connection between his home education and his school education, but I am reminded of the children's storybook *Shi-shi-etko* (Campbell, 2005). It is a book about the last four days before a young girl goes to residential school for the first time. What has always struck me upon reading this book is the fact that the girl's parents and grandparents never talk about what is to come and the adversity she will face. Instead, they focus upon strengthening her spirit or making her mind strong through experiences and cultural practices so that she is prepared for the next stage of her life. I wonder now, if that is what my father's family did for him. I wonder if they helped to make his mind strong before he went to school.

Okakok (2008) suggests that "educating a child means equipping him or her with the capability to succeed in the world he or she will live in" (p. 274), and this can be applied to the education that children receive both in and out of formal school settings. My father had to make his own mind strong. I believe it was his connection to his ancestors and his family, as well as the Haida traditions and his art, that kept his mind strong enough to overcome the adversity that came with leaving his home and his family to finish high school in Vancouver.

What I have learned from my father—that I did not learn at the university—is the importance of relationships in our classrooms. It is relationships that afford us the capacity to understand our students as unique individuals. It provides the opportunity for us to encourage them and build on the strengths that our students bring with them from their homes. This is good for all of our students, regardless of ancestry. As Battiste (2002) reminds us,

Indigenous teachings provide that every child, whether Aboriginal or not, is unique in his or her learning capacities, learning styles, and knowledge bases. Knowledge is not what some possess and others do not; it is a resourceful capacity of being that creates the context and texture of life. Thus, knowledge is not a commodity that can be possessed or controlled by educational institutions, but is a living process to be absorbed and understood. (p. 15)

## Making Our Minds Strong

Education has been a devastating endeavour for many Indigenous people in North America. Historically, it has involved attempts to eradicate our identities, and today these identities continue to be threatened by Eurocentric schooling practices (e.g., Wilson & Boatright, 2011). Therefore, we as Indigenous people must find ways to make our minds strong enough to engage and find success in these mainstream educational practices without compromising our identities.

I believe that it is possible to support students to make their minds strong against the adversity they may face in school. We, as educators, have the capacity to help to nurture that strength in our students. We can increase the authenticity in the educational experiences for our students by taking them out of the classroom to engage in authentic learning activities or we can bring in experts from particular fields to share their knowledge with our students. We can help students to understand the contribution that they can make to their communities by completing their mainstream education and returning to their communities to share with them what they have learned. When we are planning our lessons, we can consider the various ways in which students learn and ensure that we are incorporating a wide range of pedagogical practices, including observation, into our teaching practice. I believe that we can model curiosity for our students and guide them through the process of the learning that can occur when we give ourselves permission to follow our curiosity. Lastly, I believe that we can demonstrate respect for spirituality and adherence to protocol in all of our classroom conversations and activities.

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When our last interview ended, I thanked my father. I was grateful for his time and his patience with my questions. He thanked me in return for asking. With his thank-you, I was reminded of the importance of having the courage to ask for guidance from those who have lived longer than we have. I am grateful he was willing to share these stories with me, and though I know that much will be lost in the translation from spoken words to written ones (Chartrand, 2012), I still hope that some of the wisdom that he shared with me will be passed onto you.

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